

The Poisonwood Bible

by Barbara Kingsolver

Background

In 1963 Dr Wendell R. Kingsolver's family went with him to the Congo where he practised medicine for a year. His daughter Barbara returned to her home in Kentucky with, as she describes it, 'an acutely heightened sense of race, of ethnicity'. **The Poisonwood Bible** is the product of that extraordinarily formative experience which made Kingsolver both the person and the writer that she is today.

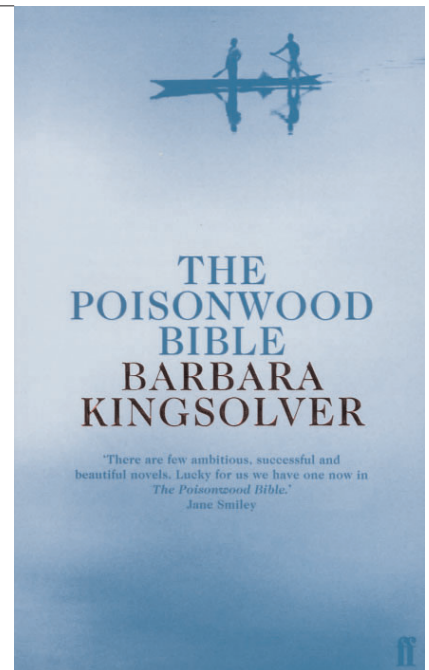
All five of Barbara Kingsolver's novels share a concern with social justice and cultural differences, from the wanton pollution of a village river in **Animal Dreams** to the ill-treatment of Native Americans in **Pigs in Heaven**. In **The Poisonwood Bible** she extends that concern from the small canvas of the domestic novel to an exploration of the forces that have helped shape modern Africa, expertly blending fact with fiction, and touching on a multitude of political and social issues, from race to religion, colonialism to covert manipulation.

Names are important in Kingsolver's novel. Each sister acquires an African name, whether she is aware of it or not. As Adah learns from Nelson 'nommo' or the naming of things is crucial to understanding. When the Prices arrive in Africa, the country they enter is called the Belgian Republic of Congo. Concerned only with his fanatical desire to convert and baptise the inhabitants of Kilanga, Nathan Price remains stubbornly unheeding of the political turbulence of his new home, or the hand which his old one is playing in it. With Patrice Lumumba's assassination and the installation of Mobutu after a CIA-backed coup, the country's name changes to Zaire but the villagers' lives become even harder.

Since the publication of **The Poisonwood Bible** Mobutu's regime has been ousted, toppled by Laurent Kabila. The country's name was changed once more but the Democratic Republic of Congo soon became embroiled in bloody turmoil. President Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001. His son, Joseph, replaced him and remains in power, presiding over a fragile peace.

The Poisonwood Bible - In Brief

Unprepared for the physical, spiritual and mental challenges that he and his family will face Nathan Price, a fanatical Baptist preacher, takes up his mission in the Congo in 1959. Nathan's uncompromising faith and his ignorance of the country into which he has stumbled blind him to the reactions of the villagers of Kilanga. Horrified by filth, disease and poverty, his wife and their daughters attempt to find their own ways to survive in Africa until calamity strikes the family. The Prices' small tragedy is set against the backdrop of Congo's turbulent transition from Belgian colonialism to a notional independence. Long exploited for its mineral wealth, Congo's brief flowering of freedom was snuffed out by the assassination of the popular new socialist leader Patrice Lumumba who was replaced by America's puppet, the corrupt Mobutu. Told through the haunting voices of Nathan's wife and four daughters, **The Poisonwood Bible** explores religion, colonialism and corruption in Africa with a powerful yet sensitive humanity.



For Discussion . . .

- The book opens with the sentence 'Imagine a ruin so strange, it must never have happened!' While at the end of the novel the Congolese woman who sells Orleana her carvings says she knows nothing of Kilanga, that 'there is no such village'. Why do you think Barbara Kingsolver brackets her novel with these two statements?
- The novel is written in five narrative voices. How does each sister throw light on the others and on their experience in Africa? How would you describe the tone and style of each voice? What does each contribute to the novel? Which do you think is most successful and why? Nathan's is the only Price family voice absent from the book. Why do you think Kingsolver chose not to give him a narrative of his own?
- 'Not everyone can see it, but my father's heart is as large as his hands. And his wisdom is great' (Book One - last paragraph, Leah's second section). How much has Leah's opinion of her father changed by the end of the novel? What makes her begin to question his beliefs and his wisdom in taking the family to Congo? How would you describe Nathan Price?
- 'I gathered through overhearing my parents that Brother Fowles had entered into unconventional alliances with the local people. . .' (Book One - mid-way through Leah's second section). What were those 'unconventional alliances'? How do Brother Fowles and Nathan differ in their attitudes towards the Congolese and their religion? How does Brother Fowles' Christianity differ from Nathan's? What is the Congolese attitude towards Christianity?
- Anatole calls Leah 'Béene-béene' - 'as true as true can be'. To what extent does she live up to her name?
- What effect does Ruth May's death have on the Prices and on the village? How important was she in helping the others to find a way to live in Africa? How does the loss of one child compare with the loss of so many in the village from dysentery?
- 'You can't just sashay into the jungle aiming to change it all over to the Christian style without expecting the jungle to change you right back.' reflects Rachel (Book Six, towards the end of Rachel's section). How has Rachel changed since her arrival in Africa? What effect has Africa had on her two surviving sisters? What do you make of each of their accounts of their experiences, and of Africa, in Book Six?
- How would you interpret the final chapter? Whose voice is it written in?
- Why do you think Kingsolver chose to call her novel 'The Poisonwood Bible'?
- What does the novel have to say about the cultural differences between the Congolese and the Americans? To what extent do the Prices (excluding Nathan) come to an understanding and acceptance of those differences?
- How important is colonialism in the novel? What do we learn of the relationship between Belgium and her colony? Can American interference in Congolese and, later, in Angolan affairs be described as a form of colonialism? How has the Africa of today been shaped by its colonial past?
- **The Poisonwood Bible** has been a bestseller in both the United States and the United Kingdom. How do you think the reactions of an American reader might differ from those of a British reader?
- **The Poisonwood Bible** has much to say about events in Congo during the mid- to late-twentieth century, and America's part in them. How important do you think fiction is in helping us to understand history and the important issues that shape our lives? How successful do you think **The Poisonwood Bible** is in this context?



About the Author

Barbara Kingsolver was born in Annapolis, Maryland in 1955. She grew up in rural Kentucky where her father was the local physician but spent some time in both the Congo and St Lucia where her father practised medicine.

Kingsolver won a scholarship to DePauw University, Indiana, where she majored in biology, took a creative writing course and became active in the last anti-Vietnam War protests. After graduating in 1977, she lived and worked in a variety of places including France and Greece. In the early 1980s she took a Masters degree in biology and ecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She took up a position as a science writer at the university, and went on to write features for journals and newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Smithsonian*.

Kingsolver took up writing fiction when she suffered from insomnia while pregnant. Her first novel, **The Bean Trees**, was published in 1988. She remains keenly interested in ecology, a recurrent theme in her novels, and is an active environmentalist and human rights supporter. **The Poisonwood Bible** was shortlisted for both the Pulitzer and PEN/Faulkner Awards. In 2005 it was voted British reading groups' favourite book.

Other Books by Barbara Kingsolver

Novels

The Bean Trees
Animal Dreams
Pigs in Heaven
Prodigal Summer

Short Stories

Homeland

Essays

High Tide in Tuscon
Small Wonder

Suggested Further Reading

Fiction

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe
The Darling by Russell Banks
The Catatstrophist by Ronan Bennett
Water Music by T C Boyle
Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad
A Bend in the River by V S Naipaul
Mosquito Coast by Paul Theroux

Non-fiction

King Leopold's Ghost by Adam Hochschild

Resources

Barbara Kingsolver's website:
www.kingsolver.com/home/index.asp

Interview in Salon web magazine:
<http://www.salon.com/16dec1995/departments/litchat.html>

Transcript of interview with David Gergen originally aired on the American Public Broadcasting Service:
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/kingsolver.html>

Interview by Ellen Kanner at Book Page website on the publication of **The Poisonwood Bible**:
http://www.bookpage.com/9811bp/barbara_kingsolver.html

BBC News's profile of the Democratic Republic of Congo:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1076399.stm